

A Subcontinent Apart: Cross-Cultural Interactions Between India and the Muslim World During the Abbasid Era

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Mountains and rivers mark the boundary between the Indian subcontinent and the rest of Asia. During the Abbasid era, economic activity flourished in India's port cities since Muslims sought works that could not be found in the Islamic world. Culture was not the only thing influenced by India's relationship with Muslim nations. The Muslims' influence can be observed in the Urdu language, a composite of Persian, Turkish, Arabic, and multiple Indian dialects, and traditional Hindu temples that display Persian and Arabic influences in their architecture.

Rivers and mountain ranges mark the boundary between the Indian subcontinent and the rest of Asia; creating a cradle for a cultural and ethnic population distinct from the nations that surrounds it. While there had been many forays into India by the great empires of the Classical era, with both pre-Achaemenid Persia and the Macedonians under Alexander holding territory in northern India for brief periods of time,¹ India has always been Asia's unreachable prize — with mountains, climate, or strength of arms repelling would-be conquerors.²

Despite India's relative isolation it still managed to spread its influence beyond its borders with sea-based trade routes reaching as far as Borneo and Java.³ The Indians' outward reach expanded greatly from the 8th century as Hinduism spread across the subcontinent, and the cities became economic hubs. Large numbers of the rural population migrated to cities built around great temples, leading to a rapid wave of urbanization. This was also an era of relative peace between the Indian kingdoms, allowing the people living in the Indian subcontinent to focus on

¹Farrokh, *Shadows in the Desert*, 20.

²Ali, *Islam in India*, 56.

³Bennison, *The Great Caliphs*, 6.

economic growth and trade.⁴ This flourishing period in India's history coincided with the peak of the Islamic Golden Age, during which time the Caliphate under the Abbasids sought works and teachings not found in the Islamic world so that they could be translated in Bagdad.⁵ Thus, interaction between the Caliphate and India was inevitable, especially with the Caliphate's dominating trade in the Indian Ocean and the Silk Road. The question is: what form did it take, and how did these interactions shape the two cultures?

To fully understand the relationship between India and the Caliphate, one must examine the history the two powers shared, both in the form of Indo-Arab relations prior to the rise of the Caliphate, and the cultural and economic ties between India and Sasanian Persia which the Caliphate inherited from conquering Iraq and Iran.⁶ An examination of the Muslim-held Sindh region of India, modern-day Pakistan, will also be held for a view of a more direct, forceful melding of the two cultures.

The first subject is difficult to fully examine since written records of pre-Islamic Arabia are rare. That said, the mercantile networks of old Arabia were well-documented — with trading centers built throughout the desert,⁷ linked by caravan routes to transport goods the coastal settlements brought from across the peninsula. Between legitimate trade and inter-tribal raiding and banditry, goods from abroad could change hands multiple times and cross the entire peninsula. This system would be the forerunner for the later Caliphate, which was built on a very urban basis in comparison to previous civilizations in the region so that they could encourage a steady flow of goods across the vast empire. This trade network also facilitated the flow of culture and ideas. However, migration to the peninsula was scarce in frequency and number, leaving the inland areas of the peninsula isolated.⁸ The tribal culture of early Arabia was built along its own lines, with the foreign influences that would shape Arab culture and fascinate the Muslim scholars of the Caliphate in later years.

The Abbasids are featured more prominently in written works that concern the Indian-Persian cultural ties that were present during this era. Their capital, Bagdad, was built in the ancient Persian heartland to provide easy access to India's ports.⁹ The advisor to the early Abbasid caliph, Al-Mansur, even used the prospect of trade with India as a selling point when the new capital's location was being decided; highlighting the benefits the merchants of India could bring to their

⁴Friedmann, *Islam in Asia*, 31.

⁵Bennison, 183.

⁶Farrokh, 287.

⁷Bennison, 4.

⁸Bennison, 6.

⁹Weit, *Baghdad: Metropolis of the Abbasid Caliphate*, 10.

western neighbors.¹⁰ It is unsurprising that the Abbasids strove to maintain a close relation with India since the Abbasid dynasty were heavily influenced by the Persians — they did, after all, occupy traditional Persian territory. This continuity with the fallen Sasanian Empire brought with it control over Sasanian trade networks of which India was an integral part. The Sasanians even kept large numbers of Indian elephants and mercenaries as part of their core army,¹¹ indicative of the close relations between the two civilizations. Supporting this hypothesis are the works of al-Jahiz, a prominent writer during the early Abbasid period. He was widely travelled and wrote at length about the people of India, casting them in a positive light and showing a great deal of curiosity towards Hinduism.¹²

While India certainly captured the imaginations of the Muslims, the subcontinent still remained a distant and nebulous concept to those living in the Muslim world. On the other hand, Indo-Islamic interactions were a more immediate and relevant concern for those living in India. In the early days of Islam — even as early as the days of the Prophet — Islam was finding converts among the lower classes who saw its message of equality as an escape from the caste system. Kerala, in particular, became a center for conversion since it had a sizeable population of Arab merchants and was in close proximity to the coastal cities of Arabia.¹³ The Islamic influence in this region is most prominent in building. Traditional Hindu temples — as well as government and secular buildings — display a mixture of Persian and Arabic influences in their designs and architecture.¹⁴

In northern India, interactions took a different form since the expansionistic Umayyads defeated Rajah Dahir, and carved out a sizeable portion of territory in the Indus Valley and the Sindh region prior to the Abbasid conquest. Though Dahir was unpopular among his subjects, the fact remains that Islam was first introduced to the Hindus by invading armies. In addition, in Kerala and Rashtrakuta, Muslims were a minority under Hindu rule. In Sindh, they were the ruling minority with primarily Hindu subjects, leading to a very different power dynamic. Under Muslim rule, the Christians and Jews in the Middle East and Spain were protected by the *dhimma*; while the Hindus were not since they were identified as pagans and idol-worshippers by mainstream Islamic theologians.¹⁵ However, this soon changed when the need to maintain political and social stability arose. The Hindus were given the same protection that People of the Book enjoyed, this eventually led to the poll tax being waived under the sultan of Delhi. This is likely because the Hindus, previously the ruling majority, would have been less accepting of

¹⁰Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, 133.

¹¹Farrokh, 77.

¹²Ali, 11.

¹³Ali, 53.

¹⁴Friedmann, 149.

¹⁵Ali, 11.

secondary status than Coptic Christians or Jews who have already experienced religious persecution under the Byzantines.¹⁶ Under the Muslims' rule, northern India came to be a center for cultural exchange and fusion between Asia, India and the Muslim world. This synthesis of civilizations can still be observed in the Urdu language — a composite of Persian, Turkish, Arabic and multiple Indian dialects — and the Sikh faith, a religion originating from Muslim-held Punjab in the 15th century and demonstrates many close connections to Sufism.¹⁷ This hybrid culture, or *Ganga-Jamuni tehzib*, served to bring the two peoples together in a region that might have otherwise fractured from internal struggle. In the last years of the Abbasid era, as the Abbasids lost power to their regional sultans and slave soldiers, while the Mongols ravaged Iran, northern India underwent a cultural renaissance rivalling that of Egypt, beating back the Mongol invasions and building an enduring legacy.¹⁸ The Mamluk Sultanate of Delhi, the Mughals, and modern-day Pakistan were built on the foundations laid during the Abbasid reign in Al-Sindh.

The last and most important factor that contributed to Islam's spread to India were the Sufis. While it is true that there were limited conversions to Islam in Kerala, and northern India began very early in Islam's history; it was only in the latter half of the Abbasid era that Islam began to appeal to the broader population of the Indian subcontinent, evolving beyond its status as a tolerated minority religion.¹⁹ This shift coincides with the arrival of Sufis from Iran through Al-Sindh, and travelling deeper into India. The more mystical and less restrictive form of Islam they preached made the Sufis more successful than the conservative theologians. They also managed to find a great deal of common ground with the Hindu yogis they came into contact with. Many Sufi schools were developed in India, blending the life of an Islamic mystic with that of a yogi, or Bhakti saint.²⁰ Through Sufi and Indian efforts, Islam came to spread more quickly than had previously been possible. Consider Indonesia, a nation that is home to the largest Muslim population in the world, received the message of Islam from Indian missionaries and traders. The fact that it was Islam, and not Hinduism, which became the majority religion in Indonesia speaks to both the strength of the Sufi message and to the vital role Muslims played in sea based trade across Asia.²¹

Despite the distrust those at the top of the Hindu caste system had of Muslims during the early spread of Islam, and the occasional periods of conflict between the Islamic-ruled Sindh and their southern neighbors, these manifold contributions

¹⁶Egger, *A History of the Muslim World to 1405*, 9.

¹⁷Ali, 14.

¹⁸Ali, 56.

¹⁹Ali, 53.

²⁰Friedmann, 72.

²¹Wade, "An Early Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia," 235.

Islam made to Indian culture and vice-versa demonstrate the proud legacy the two civilizations built together.

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